

THE ASCETIC EPIDEMIC IN THE EARLY CHURCH.

EGYPT was the parent of monachism, and it was there that it attained both its extreme development and its most austere severity; but there was very soon scarcely any Christian country in which a similar movement was not ardently propagated. St. Athanasius and St. Zeno are said to have introduced it into Italy, where it soon afterward received a great stimulus from St. Basil. St. Hilarion instituted the first monks in Palestine, and he lived to see many thousands subject to his rule, and, toward the close of his life, to plant monachism in Cyprus. Eustathius, Bishop of Scastia, spread it through Armenia, Paphlagonia, and Pontus. St. Basil labored along the wild shores of the Euxine. St. Martin of Tours founded the first monastery in Gaul, and two thousand monks attended his funeral. Unrecorded missionaries planted the new institution in the heart of Ethioopia, amid the little islands that stud the Mediterranean, and in the secluded valleys of Wales and Ireland. But even more wonderful than the many thousands who thus abandoned the world, is the reverence with which they were regarded by those who, by their attainments or their character, would seem most opposed to the monastic ideal. No one had more reason than Augustine to know the danger of enforced celibacy, but St. Augustine exerted all his energies to spread monasticism through his diocese. St. Ambrose, who was by nature an acute statesman; St. Jerome and St. Basil, who were ambitious scholars; St. Chrysostom, who was preeminently formed to sway the refined throngs of a metropolis—all exerted their powers in favor of the life of solitude, and the three last practised it themselves. St. Arsenius, who was surpassed by no one in the extravagance of his penances, had held a high office at the court of the Emperor Arcadius. Pilgrims wandered among the deserts, collecting accounts of the miracles and the austerities of the saints, which filled Christendom with admiration; and the strange biographies which were thus formed, wild and grotesque as they are, enable us to realize very vividly the general features of the anchoritic life, which became the new ideal of the Christian world.

There is, perhaps, no phase in the moral history of mankind of a deeper or more painful interest than this ascetic epidemic. A hideous, sordid, and emaciated maniac, without knowledge, without patriotism, without natural affection, passing his life in a long routine of useless and atrocious self-torture, and quailing before the ghastly phantoms of his delirious brain, had become the ideal of the nations which had known the writings of Plato and Cicero and the lives of Socrates or Cato. For about two centuries, the hideous maceration of the body

was regarded as the highest proof of excellence. St. Jerome declares, with a thrill of admiration, how he had seen a monk who for thirty years had lived exclusively on a small portion of barley bread and of muddy water; another, who lived in a hole, and never eat more than five figs for his daily repast; a third, who cut his hair only on Easter Sunday, who never washed his clothes, who never changed his tunic till it fell to pieces, who starved himself till his eyes grew dim, and his skin "like a pumice-stone," and whose merits, shown by these austerities, Homer himself would be unable to recount. For six months, it is said, St. Macarius of Alexandria slept in a marsh, and exposed his body naked to the stings of venomous flies. He was accustomed to carry about with him eighty pounds of iron. His disciple, St. Eusebius, carried one hundred and fifty pounds of iron, and lived for three years in a dried-up well. St. Sabinus would only eat corn that had become rotten by remaining for a month in water. St. Besarion spent forty days and nights in the middle of thorn-bushes, and for forty years never lay down when he slept, which last penance was also, during fifteen years, practiced by St. Pachomius. Some saints, like St. Marcian, restricted themselves to one meal a day, so small that they continually suffered the pangs of hunger. Of one of them it is related that his daily food was six ounces of bread and a few herbs; that he was never seen to recline on a mat or bed, or even to place his limbs easily for sleep; but that sometimes, from excess of weariness, his eyes would close at his meals, and the food would drop into his mouth. Other saints, however, ate only every second day; while many, if we could believe the monkish historian, abstained for whole weeks from all nourishment. St. Macarius of Alexandria is said during an entire week to have never lain down, or eaten any thing but a few uncooked herbs on Sunday. Of another famous saint, named John, it is asserted that for three whole years he stood in prayer, leaning upon a rock; that, during all that time, he never sat or lay down, and that his only nourishment was the sacrament, which was brought him on Sundays. Some of the hermits lived in deserted dens of wild beasts, others in dried-up wells, while others found a congenial resting-place among the tombs. Some disdained all clothes, and crawled abroad like the wild beasts, covered only by their matted hair. In Mesopotamia, and part of Syria, there existed a sect known by the name of "Grazers," who never lived under a roof, who ate neither flesh nor bread, but who spent their time forever on the mountain-side, and ate grass like cattle. The cleanliness of the body was regarded as a pollution of the soul, and the saints who were most admired had become one hideous mass of clotted filth. St. Athanasius relates with enthusiasm how St. Antony, the patriarch of monachism, had never, in extreme old age, been guilty of washing his feet. The less constant St. Pemen fell into this habit for the first time when a very old man, and, with a glimmering of common-sense, defended himself against the astonished monks by saying that he had "learned to kill, not his body, but his passions." St. Abraham the hermit, however, who lived for fifty years after his conversion, rigidly refused from that date to wash either his face or his feet. He was, it is said, a person of singular beauty, and his biographer somewhat strangely remarks that "his face reflected the purity of his soul." St. Ammon had never seen himself naked. A famous virgin named Silvia, though she was sixty years old, and though bodily sickness was a consequence of her habits, resolutely refused, on religious principles, to wash any part of her body except her fingers. St. Euphrasia joined a convent of one hundred and thirty nuns, who never washed their feet, and who shuddered at the mention of a bath. An anchorite once imagined that he was mocked by an illusion of the devil, as he saw gliding before him through the desert a naked creature black with filth and years of exposure, and with white hair floating to the wind. It was a once beautiful woman, St. Mary of Egypt, who had thus, during forty-seven years, been expiating her sins. The occasional decadence of the monks into habits of decency was a subject of much reproach. "Our fathers," said the Abbot Alexander, looking mournfully back to the past, "never washed their faces, but we frequent the public baths." It was related of one monastery in the desert that the monks suffered greatly from want of water to drink; but, at the prayer of the Abbot Theodosius, a copious stream was produced. But soon some monks, tempted by the abundant supply, diverged from their old austerity, and persuaded the abbot to avail himself of the stream for the construction of the bath. The bath was made. Once, and once only, did the monks enjoy their ablutions, when the stream ceased to flow. Prayers, tears, and fastings, were in

vain. A whole year passed. At last, the abbot destroyed the bath, which was the object of the divine displeasure, and the waters flowed afresh. But, of all the evidences of the loathsome excesses to which this spirit was carried, the life of St. Simeon Stylites is probably the most remarkable. It would be difficult to conceive a more horrible or disgusting picture than is given of the penances by which that saint commenced his ascetic career. He had bound a rope around him so that it became imbedded in his flesh, which putrefied around it. "A horrible stench, intolerable to the by-standers, exhaled from his body, and worms dropped from him whenever he moved, and they filled his bed." Sometimes he left the monastery, and slept in a dry well, inhabited, it is said, by demons. He built successively three pillars, the last being sixty feet high, and scarcely two cubits in circumference; and on this pillar, during thirty years, he remained exposed to every change of climate, ceaselessly and rapidly bending his body in prayer almost to the level of his feet. A spectator attempted to number these rapid motions, but desisted from weariness when he had counted twelve hundred and forty-four. For a whole year, we are told, St. Simeon stood upon one leg, the other being covered with hideous ulcers, while his biographer was commissioned to stand by his side, to pick up the worms that fell from his body, and to replace them in the sores, the saint saying to the worm, "Eat what God has given you." From every quarter, pilgrims of every degree thronged to do him homage. A crowd of prelates followed him to the grave. A brilliant star is said to have shone miraculously over his pillar; the general voice of mankind pronounced him to be the highest model of a Christian saint, and several other anchorites imitated or emulated his penances. . . . In the case of the saints of the deserts, there can be no question that the picture—which is drawn chiefly by eye-witnesses—however grotesque may be some of its details, is in its leading features historically true. It is true that self-torture was for some centuries regarded as the chief measure of human excellence, that tens of thousands of the most devoted men fled to the desert to reduce themselves by maceration nearly to the condition of the brute, and that this odious superstition had acquired an almost absolute ascendancy in the ethics of the age. The examples of asceticism I have cited are but a few out of many hundreds, and volumes might be written, and have been written, detailing them. Till the reform of St. Benedict, the ideal was on the whole unchanged.
